
COMMENTARY

Advice from a snowboarding instructor

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West J Med 2000;174:130-131

Snowboarding is an exhilarating sport, but even the highly experienced snowboarder faces a real risk of injury. Although snowboarders often have an undeserved reputation for recklessness, they can, with proper instruction, ride skillfully, minimizing the risk to themselves and others.

Because snowboarding differs mechanically from skiing, snowboarders and their physicians need to be aware of how injuries occur. An old slogan, "be aware, ski with care," can also be applied to snowboarding. Skiers go down the mountain facing forward, whereas snowboarders ride at an angle with

one shoulder, hip, and foot leading the way, essentially moving sideways. The sideways angle creates a partial blind side, thus increasing the risk of colliding with other snowboards and skiers. The National Ski Patrol's responsibility code (<http://www.nsp.org/Safety/code.htm>) says that downhill skiers

Responsibility code

- 1 Always stay in control and be able to stop or avoid other people or objects.
- 2 People ahead of you have the right of way. It is your responsibility to avoid them.
- 3 You must not stop where you obstruct a trail or are not visible from above.
- 4 Whenever starting downhill or merging into a trail, look uphill and yield to others.
- 5 Always use devices to help prevent runaway equipment.
- 6 Observe all posted signs and warnings. Keep off closed trails and out of closed areas.
- 7 Before using any lift, you must have the knowledge and ability to load, ride, and unload safely.

and snowboarders have the right-of-way (see box). Knowing who is around and how to stop are essential to safe riding.

In the snowboarder's angled stance, balance comes from an alignment of the head, torso, and hips over the feet. Primary balance comes from equally distributing weight over both legs as appropriate for the pitch of the

slope. Beginners, as they are learning how to balance with their legs and torso, sometimes use their arms for additional support. Before learning how to correctly protect themselves during a fall, beginners may use their arms to block the blow; this action, unfortunately, can cause finger, wrist, arm, or shoulder injuries, as discussed by Dunn. Professional instructors can guide students through the falling process, and most equipment rental shops offer wrist guards, buttocks, and kneepads.

Because novices are learning how to control their speed and to stop, many injuries happen on the beginner slopes. Many beginners experience the painful "fly swatter" fall—they are upright when suddenly they catch an edge and are thrown to the snow. Additionally, navigating the chair lift can be difficult. Lift operators offer assistance to people as they get on and off the lift to prevent them from collision and falls.

Most injuries occur on the first or last runs of the day because people either are not warmed up or are tired after a rigorous workout. Staying hydrated and taking breaks to eat warm, carbohydrate-rich foods are essential. By keeping their bodies well fueled and rested, snowboarders lower the risk of hypothermia, altitude sickness, injury, and dehydration.

Sunscreen and sunglasses or goggles are vital to avoid sunburn, windburn, and snow blindness, even on overcast days. The proper clothing—a layering system with a polypropylene or silk thermal, a fleece or wool mid-

layer, and a water-resistant outer coat—help regulate body temperature. Blue jeans and cotton sweatshirts should be saved for après-ski.

Helmets have several advantages. Principally, they protect the head from serious trauma. They also reduce the pain associated with falling on hard or packed snow. Up to 40% of body heat escapes through the head, and helmets are better than hats for retaining heat.

Some riders don't realize how snug their boots should be laced. I always ask someone to tighten my laces so I can wiggle my toes but not move my foot. Most resorts require that snowboards have a safety retention device, so snowboarders should double-check to see if they have a "leash."

Sometimes snowboarders venture into terrain that is beyond their ability level. I think of snowboarding as having 3 psychological zones: the "comfort zone" of sitting in the lodge, the "adventure zone" of riding in challenging fun terrain, and the "danger zone" where all sense of reason leaves and fear sets in. Many accidents occur in the danger zone when riders panic and scramble to regain control.

Like any sport, snowboarding has its risks. By being aware of the mechanics involved in the sport, keeping an eye on surrounding skiers, using protective gear, and staying within their ability level, snowboarders can minimize the risk of injury.

Author: Krista Danielson taught snowboarding in Telluride, CO for 2 seasons.

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